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Jacki Fitzpatrick

Texas Tech University, [Jacki.Fitzpatrick@ttu.edu](mailto:Jacki.Fitzpatrick@ttu.edu)

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## **A Service Learning Assignment In An Undergraduate Public Policy Course**

**Jacki Fitzpatrick**  
Texas Tech University

*The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the development of a service learning (SL) assignment in an undergraduate public policy course. The instructor completed a university-sponsored SL training program and then integrated SL into an extant course. The paper provides a brief overview of the (a) course topics, (b) SL planning process, (c) SL assignment, (d) reflection papers and (e) syllabus description of the SL assignment. The assignment has been implemented over several semesters. Across semesters, the purpose of the SL assignment remains focused on salience to course concepts. Thus, there is the potential that SL is a value-added experience for students (and community members [agency staff, clients]). Based on the instructor's experience with the SL assignment, some recommendations for other courses are offered. The recommendations are sufficiently broad that they can be utilized across academic courses/disciplines. Thus, the SL parameters are not exclusively focused on social science courses.*

*Keywords: Service learning, Public policy, Reflection papers*

Service learning (SL) is a pedagogical technique in which instructors seek to foster students' connections between course concepts and actual conditions/situations outside of the classroom (Knecht & Martinez, 2012). Students are not merely observers of the conditions/situations. Rather, students are actively engaged with community partners (e.g., social service agencies, for-profit clients, branches of government) to complete specific projects or foster general operations (e.g., Britt, 2012). Through the SL activities, students can gain exposure to the reality of working conditions in their chosen fields. SL has been used in diverse academic areas, such as ecology (Kelly & Abel, 2012), education (Seban, 2013), theology (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012), and physical therapy/therapeutic riding (Brady, Lawyer, Guay, Pyle, & Cepica, 2005).

SL gives students exposure to events that are typically beyond the traditional classroom, and sometimes beyond the students' life experiences (Cohen, Hatchett & Eastridge, 2006; Knecht & Martinez, 2012). This exposure can help students to make linkages between the course-based and field-based information (e.g., Ballard & Elmore, 2009). This linkage can be particularly helpful when instructors are teaching concepts that are somewhat abstract (Eyler, 2002), such as public policy. The purpose of this paper is to describe the utilization of an SL assignment in an undergraduate course.

### **Course**

This SL assignment was utilized in a public policy course (Family in the Community). Over the past four semesters, the average enrollment for this instructor's course section has been approximately 25 students. The course draws connections between macrosystemic policy and the microsystemic impact on families (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). More specifically, the course addresses (a) health/mental health care, (b) employment, (c) education, (d) immigration/refugees, (e) humanitarian aid/disaster relief, (f) child welfare and (g) poverty.

Each week, discussion focuses on policies' (a) original intent, (b) application and (c) social consequences. Students need to know the content of policies and laws to which they (as professionals) and their clients will be bound. However, the review does not necessarily facilitate students' engagement in policies. There is a desire to see how public policy and service issues work in the real world (Crutsinger, Pookulangara, Tran & Duncan, 2004). For this reason, an SL component was added.

According to Brabant and Hochman (2004), SL lets the students gain exposure to situations that would be difficult to replicate in the classroom. Indeed, SL moves students to environments that are typically beyond the range of their daily lives (Wong, 2007). SL has been used in settings such as middle schools (Eckerman Pitton, 2006), adult care centers (Jarrott, 2001), and jails (Swanson, King & Wolbert, 1997).

### **Training/Planning Process**

According to Flinders, Nicholson, Carlascio and Gilb (2013), there are two SL models (project, partnership) for collaborations with community partners. The project model focuses on a singular SL task or activity in which students and community partners will be engaged. The interactions between students and partners are limited to the specific project. Thus, SL students are not likely to have exposure to broad aspects of the partners' vision, resources or daily operations. When the project is completed, the interactions among students, faculty and partners might be terminated (Flinders et al., 2013). This model would work for some partner conditions, such as limited capacity for student inclusion in agency operations (e.g., Littlepage, Gazley, & Bennett, 2012). In contrast, the partnership model focuses on a long-term relationship between faculty and community partners (Flinders et al., 2013). This relationship provides a source of stability as various students (across semesters) enter and exit the partner's agency (e.g., Brondani et al., 2011). Although students might engage in a specific project, the SL work is not limited to one project. The partnership focuses on a shared vision for the ways in which SL students might contribute to the agency's functioning, and the agency provides relevant experiences for students. Thus, SL students can be exposed to the realistic conditions of agencies, which will likely facilitate their knowledge/skill development for their future professions (e.g., Britt, 2012). For this course, the instructor chose to utilize the partnership model.

The instructor completed an SL fellowship program conducted by the university (for more information, see <http://www.tltc.ttu.edu/servicelearning/fellowship.asp>). The programs' faculty training component was completed in a fall semester and the instructor began utilizing the SL assignment in a spring semester course. During the training component, the instructor met with the university's SL Coordinator to identify a community partner. The instructor had three criteria for partner selection. The partner had to (a) serve clients who would likely be dealing with multiple policy issues, (b) provide opportunities for students to work directly with clients/staff, and (c) allow students to work on nights and/or weekends. The selected site was the regional Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC). The instructor, university coordinator and RMHC Volunteer Coordinator discussed SL logistics, such as (a) pre-SL requirements for RMHC [e.g., background checks], (b) typical student tasks, (c) transportation/insurance responsibilities, and (d) instructor revocation of students' SL opportunities [if staff or instructor identified a poor fit between students and RMHC].

In addition, the discussion focused on the RMHC Volunteer Coordinator's vision for the

inclusion of service learning students. This discussion was essential to prevent discrepant expectations between the instructor and community partner staff. The coordinator emphasized that the staff's primary focus is on their clients, and clients' needs can change rather quickly (in response to children's health status). Thus, SL students would be expected to be adaptable to the house demands of the day (e.g., changes in tasks, schedule). The coordinator also noted that students might sometimes be asked to do indirect SL tasks (e.g., sorting donations, answering phones). Students' completion of these tasks would allow staff to tend to other issues (e.g., client crises) as they arose. Thus, SL students did not have a separate or special project to which they dedicated their efforts. Rather, students would simply be integrated into meeting the daily needs of RMHC (during their SL shifts). The instructor agreed that these conditions were common to many social service agencies and appropriate expectations for student involvement. This collaboration plan (between the instructor and RMHC Volunteer Coordinator) was consistent with the SL partnership model (Flinders et al., 2013).

### **Assignment**

When students worked at RMHC, they could engage in either direct (interactions with clients) or indirect (interactions with staff) SL work. Indirect work (a) facilitates the functioning of the agency [house] in which clients live and (b) frees staff from completing certain tasks [e.g., sorting donations], which gives staff more time to directly serve clients. According to Rowls and Swick (2000), both direct and indirect SL benefit clients. Over the semester, students were typically required to complete 15 hours of work (three hours per week). The instructor was concerned that if students were able to complete the SL tasks in a marathon session (Spring Break), then students would hinder their learning opportunities. As reflection is a core component of SL (Dubinsky, 2006), it was necessary to extend work across several weeks.

When SL is used in a course, it might be typical to require all students to engage in the assignment. However, this course offered two options – the SL work at RMHC or an alternative (non-SL) assignment. More specifically, the alternative assignment was viewership of public policy documentaries. The documentaries profiled individuals who faced various problems and their efforts to navigate through the public policy system to receive needed services (e.g., health care, education, employment). Thus, the documentary and SL were parallel in exposing students to realistic policy and client issues. However, the documentary option had no impact on the community via service.

An alternative assignment was created for several reasons. From a social science perspective, it was necessary to consider the ethical issues that might arise with the SL assignment. For example, it is possible that some students won't pass the required background check (to work at RMHC). In this case, it would be unreasonable to expect the community partner to make an accommodation. In addition, some students might have a personal history (e.g., deceased sibling) or characteristic (e.g., discomfort with illness/disability) that hinders their ability to function appropriately or effectively at RMHC. Under these conditions, it would be an undue burden to require students to do SL work. It would also be an undue burden for staff if they have to divert some of their energy from clients to care for distressed students. Another possibility is that the community partners might find that some students are not a good fit. Rather than simply asking RMHC to endure a poor fit for the remainder of the semester, it is possible to quickly resolve this

situation (by switching a student to the alternative). This option demonstrates respect for community partners, which is consistent with ethical principles. Although it could be argued that students should simply withdraw from courses if they can't meet the SL expectations, this is problematic for required courses. Thus, an alternative assignment offers a way to address or ameliorate some of the ethical issues.

The alternative assignment also serves a practical purpose. If circumstances arise in which it is not feasible for students to complete part/all of SL, then the instructor has a pre-planned option. For example, a community partner might experience changes (e.g., staff, funding, policy) that could lead to a suspension of SL opportunities. In addition, it is possible that students are impacted by circumstances beyond their control. During one semester, there was a flu outbreak in the community and 80% of students reported illness over a four-week period. During this period, students were not permitted (by RMHC) to complete SL work because the students posed a contagion risk for clients. Thus, it was necessary for some students to engage in the alternative assignment until they recovered from the flu. Thereafter, these students resumed the SL work.

It is also noteworthy that some students have actively chosen the alternative assignment. In comparison to the SL work, students have valued that the documentaries give them exposure to international perspectives on public policy (e.g., health care in Germany, employment in Israel). In addition, some students found that their schedules were incompatible with RMHC parameters. During the Great Recession of the past four years, an increasing number of students reported that they are working 1-2 jobs and carrying a full-course load. Thus, they are most able to dedicate their efforts to out-of-class assignments (including SL) after midnight. So, the alternative assignment is a good fit for the time constraints of "3am" students.

### **Reflection Papers**

Consistent with SL principles (Dubinsky, 2006), students were required to complete reflection papers. According to Felten, Gilchrist and Darby (2006), reflection allows students to identify significant elements of their experiences and analyze contextual factors that affect the experiences. In addition, reflection should help students to make connections between the experiences and specific course concepts (Lewandowski, 2012). Thus, students completed five brief papers. Multiple brief papers offered several advantages. First, each paper focused on the immediacy of students' experience. While the events are still fresh in their minds, students were able to write about their (a) interactions with clients/staff and (b) exposure to policy issues. Second, the papers fit the transitory nature of RMHC clients (whose stays vary from a few days to several months). Under these circumstances, it was better to capture students' perspectives on single (or small groups) of clients at a time. Third, the papers allowed students to focus on specific policy issues. Up to the current semester, the instructor used the five-paper format. However, a change was made recently to a four-paper format. Students still work five SL shifts, but did not have to write a paper in response to one shift. This change accounted for the possibilities that students might have a shift which has (a) SL activities of low-course relevance or (b) highly intense events [e.g., notification of a child's death]. Such events might be too difficult for some students to address in a graded assignment.

The reflection papers were not simply an opportunity for students to express their opinions (e.g., "I liked this client"). Opinions do not demonstrate comprehension of course

concepts. According to Eyler (2002), SL should have an informational (rather than simply an emotional) impact on students. Thus, the questions (to which students responded) were not “How do you feel about the American with Disabilities Act?”. Rather, the questions were “How are RMHC services consistent with child welfare policies described by Jenson and Fraser (2006)?”. Good responses required that students (a) demonstrate an accurate comprehension of policy issues and (b) integrate policy issues with clients’ issues. For each paper, students were given a choice of two questions. This choice allowed students to respond to the question that best fit the issues that they had faced.

Beyond the papers, students were also given opportunities to share their reflections during ungraded class discussions. Throughout the semester, all students were divided into small groups for discussion of various policy issues (e.g., distribution of community resources, prevention vs. intervention). In the context of these discussions, students were permitted to use information that they have gained from their assignments. {Note: Prior to these discussions, ethical guidelines [e.g., privileged communication] were reviewed. Students knew that they were not permitted to share information which would violate RMHC confidentiality standards.} Thus, they have opportunities to share insights from their various experiences. In addition, the instructor conducted a brief discussion with SL students on a monthly basis. These discussions were a way to monitor students’ perceptions of the assignment and determine whether any additional action is required from the instructor (e.g., contact RMHC staff to resolve an issue). Group conversation can also validate or normalize students’ SL experiences. These discussions are consistent with debriefment principles (e.g., Deahl, Srinivasan, Jones, Thomas, Neblett, & Jolly, 2000).

### **Syllabus Description**

The summary of the SL assignment is quite detailed (see Appendix). The summary specifies the anticipated time requirements so that students can plan accordingly. In addition, the summary identifies the (a) number of papers that must be written, (b) point value for each paper, and (c) total point value for the assignment. Any reactions that students have to the syllabus assignment descriptions (overwhelmed, anxious) might be the same reactions that clients have to the (a) paperwork that they must complete and (b) rules that they must follow. Thus, an open discussion of students’ reactions to the assignment descriptions can provide a bridge to (a) reduce their fears (Thompson, 2007) and (b) discuss RMHC clients’ experiences.

Another similarity between the syllabus and client services is the issue of informed consent. A detailed assignment description informs students of (a) what is expected of them, (b) the instructors’ involvement in managing the assignment, and (c) the student withdrawal/instructor revocation option. As students have extensive information, they are empowered to make an informed decision to either remain or withdraw from this assignment (or class).

In reference to the SL’s value in the course, this assignment represents 40% (40 points) of the course grade. This percentage emphasize that this assignment weighs heavily into the students’ grades. It might be unusual to give course points for (a) SL hours completed and (b) evaluation by the community partner. However, these point allocations reinforce the importance of students’ responsibility to fulfill their SL obligation. Also, the allocation gives proportional credit – students who complete more SL hours receive more points. This proportionality is consistent with academic integrity standards at this university.



The SL evaluation is completed by RMHC staff. In contrast to other SL activities (Pompa, 2005), the instructor was not onsite while students completed SL work. Compared to the instructor, the RMHC staff were more knowledgeable about the quality of students' work and the degree to which the work fit the agency's needs. Thus, it made sense to allow the staff to provide input (via the evaluation) for students' grades. This opportunity for input also fits the principles of respect and empowerment of community partners (e.g., Jarrott, 2001). In addition, the papers were conditional upon the SL work. Students could only complete one paper for each three-hour shift that they worked. So, students who worked more hours (up to the 15-hour limit) were given the opportunity to complete more papers. However, no students could complete papers (a) in lieu of SL work or (b) for shifts that they did not complete. Over three semesters, 91% of students completed all of the required SL hours.

Overall, the syllabus parameters indicated several important messages to students. First, it mattered how many hours the students completed. The number of hours impacted their access to papers [and points accrued from papers]. Second, it mattered how well they performed the SL work at RMHC. It was not sufficient to simply 'show up' at the site. Rather, students had to contribute to the community partner site in a meaningful way. Third, the papers were only part of the service learning grade. The papers were not a journal/diary exercise, but rather an assessment of student comprehension. Thus, the grade does not reflect (a) only service or (b) only learning, but reflects (c) the combination of service and learning.

### **Student/Community Partner Feedback**

At the end of the Spring 2010 semester, an anonymous survey was distributed to the students. The students were given a brief list of descriptive terms about the SL assignment; the terms were positively (e.g., "useful") and negatively (e.g., "waste of time") valenced. For each term, the students were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale the degree to which they agreed with each statement (1= "strongly disagree"; 5= "strongly agree"). The survey results indicated that 75% agreed/strongly agreed that the SL assignment was "useful". Similarly, 75% agreed/strongly agreed that assignment was an "informative" experience for them. In the same survey, 81% of students disagreed/strongly disagreed that the assignment was a "waste of time". This high disagreement rate suggests that the students did not find the assignment to be wasteful or irrelevant, which parallels the more positively-valenced results. In ungraded discussions with students across semesters, the most common complaint is that they don't get to spend enough time with RMHC families. However, most students also understand that (a) they are not trained to provide counseling/therapy to families and (b) families must be empowered to decide how much time they spend with students.

Similarly, feedback from the community partner has been quite positive. The evaluations (completed by RMHC staffmembers) of students' SL performance have been high (4.5-5 on a 5-point scale). In addition, RMHC staff have invited the top 10% of students to continue working (as full-time practicum/intern students) after the SL assignment was completed. In addition to periodic emails and phone calls, the instructor and RMHC staff have an annual inperson meeting. This meeting is conducted to discuss the quality of the SL experience for RMHC and students. The staff have noted that the collaboration is working well and recently approved renewal of the collaboration for a fourth year. The

RMHC staff have reported that their agency is “very popular” with instructors and students from multiple majors (e.g., social work, psychology, family studies, nursing, medicine, professional health). Thus, the agency has a limited number of slots which can be allocated for SL/practicum students. To date, RMHC staff have been sufficiently satisfied with the partnership to consistently retain slots specifically for students from this course.

To date, the instructor has not chosen to pursue SL activities with a different community partner. As noted previously, the current partner setting provides a strong context in which students can see the daily issues faced by clients and staff who are impacted by public policy. However, it is possible that a different partner might be needed in future semesters. For example, RMHC might find that they can no longer accommodate the students (in light of other instructors’ requests). In addition, it is possible that the course might be modified for online/distance education delivery (to students in multiple locations). Under such conditions, the instructor would seek other community partners. It might even be possible for students to complete service learning online or in their local communities (e.g., Lin, Lin, & Lu, 2012; Strait, 2011). However, the instructor would use the same selection criteria (e.g., exposure to multiple policy issues) for the current and future partner agencies.

### **Recommendations for Other Courses**

Based on this course experience, the instructor respectfully offers some recommendations for development of other SL assignments. First, design an SL assignment that parallels the conditions students will face in their professions (Crutsinger, et al., 2004). For example, if professionals are typically responsible for recruiting clients for marketing campaigns, then students could be required to recruit clients for an SL project. Such exposure to realistic conditions can facilitate students’ (a) understanding of SL experiences and (b) determining whether the future professional demands are appealing to them. Second, create an assignment that will allow students to make connections between course concepts and SL activities (Crume, Beltz, & Porr, 2012). The assignment should allow students to witness and/or experience specific concepts (Ballard & Elmore, 2009). Initially, it might be necessary for the instructor to explain the connections to students. As students become more engaged over time, they should be able to make connections independently.

Third, engage in frequent communication with the community partner. To the extent possible, the community partner and instructor should collaborate on planning the assignment (Butin, 2006; Rowls & Swick, 2000). This collaboration will likely create an assignment that maximizes the degree of fit between the course and community partner site. In addition, such collaboration will reduce the likelihood of mismatched expectations. After the students begin the SL work, instructors should periodically communicate directly with the community partner staff. For example, this instructor had contact with RMHC staff 1-2 times per month during each semester. After semesters ended, meetings were conducted to (a) discuss the strengths/weaknesses of the SL assignment and (b) identify what (if any) changes needed to be made for the next semester. Given the significant stressors faced by RMHC families, it might be an undue burden to request feedback directly from these families. However, RMHC staff are free to “speak” for clients when they communicate with the instructor. Staff feedback is used to refine the SL assignment parameters (e.g., schedule, student tasks) in future semesters. This communication demonstrates that the instructor (a) is grateful for the partner’s cooperation, (b) cares about the quality of students’ work and (c) cares about the ways in which students are impacting



the community partner.

Fourth, the instructor should encourage students to engage in frequent reflection (Eyler, 2002; Felten, et al., 2006). It might not be workable for an instructor to have students complete five brief papers. However, the instructor can engage in a variety of reflection activities (discussions, presentations). Fifth, the instructor should be trained in SL techniques. There are potential problems of SL that can have serious consequences (Butin, 2006). So, the instructor should be trained to prevent and/or ameliorate the problems as much as possible. If training is not offered locally, then the instructor might need to seek other options (online courses).

In sum, SL can be an effective teaching tool to link course concepts to the real world (Fitzpatrick, 2010). Beyond course comprehension, SL can have other benefits. For example, Jones and Abes (2004) noted that engagement in SL was positively associated with more mature identity development among undergraduates. Thus, it is possible that SL offers an opportunity to make an investment in students' personal/professional development that lasts over time (Seider et al., 2012). This investment can also benefit the larger society, as students engage in processes such as policy change (e.g., Britt, 2012) or ecological sustainability (e.g., Kelly & Abel, 2012). If SL is done well, it can meet the ethical standard noted by Eby (2001): "when 'good practices' of service are followed, students relate to significant social issues in an authentic way and contribute to programs which impact communities" (p. 1).

However, the instructor should never treat SL in a cavalier manner. This teaching technique requires a considerable commitment from faculty, and universities vary in the degree of faculty support for such commitments (e.g., Lambright & Alden, 2012; Nepper & Dymond, 2012). Thus, some faculty might have to initiate and manage all aspects of SL by themselves. In addition, it is important to be prepared for the fact that some students will not be positively influenced by their SL experiences. Some students have been apathetic or found that the experiences simply confirmed their previously held beliefs/prejudices (e.g., Knecht & Martinez, 2012). Similar to any other teaching technique, SL might not simply 'go as planned'. With due diligence, it is possible for instructors to learn from mistakes/challenges and refine SL assignments over time. If instructors pursue the partnership model (Flinders et al., 2013), then they can collaborate with community partners to create these refinements. Instructors who meet the SL challenges effectively will create conditions from which students, clients communities and universities can benefit.

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## **Appendix**

### **SL Assignment Sample Syllabus Description**

There will be one service learning (SL) assignment. The student will be required to complete 15 hours of service learning work at the Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC). The student will not need special training or skills prior to entering the RMHC SL program. The student will receive volunteer training and orientation via RMHC. The student will complete all SL activities under the supervision of RMHC mentors/staff. The RMHC mentors/staff will discuss SL interests with the student, but the RMHC mentors/staff will determine the specific activities in which the student will engage. Two basic types of activities are direct service with client families (e.g., assist families with check-ins) and indirect service to benefit clients (e.g., assist staff with categorization of donated items).

The student will be required to complete a background check application before he/she can begin service at RMHC. The course instructor will not have access to the background check reports. However, the RMHC staff will determine whether the background check indicates that the student is not eligible to serve at RMHC. If this determination is made, then the student must select the second option (Documentary Policy Analysis option) in order to fulfill this portion of the course requirements.

The student will be responsible for his/her own transportation to/from RMHC (and RMHC related sites). If the student will be driving a motor vehicle, then he/she is responsible for all insurance, registration and licensure issues related to the vehicle use. In addition, the student is solely responsible for health insurance and any health (including mental health) needs that she/he experiences during/after the SL activities. Finally, the student will be required to complete the (a) Student Service Agreement, (b) Student Activity Release Form, (c) Verification of Receipt of RMHC Volunteer Manual Form, (d) RMHC Confidentiality Agreement, and (e) the university's Confidentiality Form distributed by the instructor. The student must submit all forms to the instructor prior to beginning the SL activities. The student is not permitted to participate in service learning activities until all forms have been submitted to the instructor.

The student will be required to complete 15 hours of SL activities (excluding travel time to/from service learning sites). However, if a student begins SL activities at RMHC and is unable to complete the activities, then he/she must contact the instructor within 72 hours in order to evaluate the change to the alternative assignment. If the instructor and/or RMHC Volunteer Coordinator determine that the student is not fulfilling adequately her/his responsibilities at RMHC, then the instructor has the authority to remove the student from RMHC. If a removal occurs, then the student will be permitted to complete the remainder of her/his work via the alternative assignment.

In addition to SL activities, the student will be required to complete five brief reaction papers; each paper is worth 5 points. The student will be given a series of questions relevant to the activities and course concepts. The papers will be an opportunity for the student to express a viewpoint about specific course topics, and support the viewpoint with course material. The student will complete the papers outside of class and submit completed papers on specified dates.

**Instructions for the brief reaction papers are as follows:**

- A. All responses must be written in paragraph form. Papers will receive grade deductions for grammatical/spelling errors. Proofreading is highly recommended.
- B. The student will be asked to respond to one of several question sets provided by the instructor. Emphasis will be placed upon the integration of course material into the student's response. Integration does not mean a long series of quotations or vague referrals. Rather, integration means specific connections made between the course material and the argument made in the response. It is expected that the student will provide a cogent response that demonstrates critical thinking about issues relevant to the question set.

Each paper will be graded on the following criteria:

Relevance to question	2 points
Integration of course concepts	2 points
Organization/clarity	<u>1 point</u>
Total	5 points

In addition, the student will earn 10 points if he/she meets the 15-hour SL requirement. Point deductions will be made for activities of less than 15 hours. An RMHC staff member will complete an evaluation form on the student's performance of SL activities. This evaluation will be worth 5 points.

Thus, the total criteria for this assignment option are:

Fifteen hours of SL work	10 points
RMHC SL evaluation	5 points
Five brief reaction papers	<u>25 points</u>
Total	40 points

**About the Author**

•**Jacki Fitzpatrick** is an Associate Professor of Family Studies at Texas Tech University. She has a Master's degree in Family Therapy and Ph.D. in Family Studies. Prior to her work in academia, she spent some years in the social casework (client care) field.